Editorial

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To the outsider, the paintings on the recently constructed "Baghdad Wall" (see back cover) may reflect a wry sort of nostalgia. The romantic portrayals of pre-war Baghdad offer a visual escape from the contemporary omnipresence of violence. Like all nostalgia it offers only a selective view on the past, omitting the oppression experienced during previous decades. But given the dangers and problems of current times, it is quite understandable that Iraqi citizens look back wistfully on the lives they had lived during Saddam Hussein's rule, even if those lives were filled with economic difficulties and political tyranny (al-Ali, p. 28). One can only hope that such romantic visions of the past will facilitate future reconciliation and peace.

However, the need for a wall between Shiites and Sunnis also accentuates a darker side of "dreaming." There is a danger in allowing wishful thinking and ideological dogmatism to steer international politics. On top of the tremendous damage inflicted on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, these conflicts have produced situations antithetical to the visions which prompted foreign interventions. Afghanistan has become the world's primary producer of opium and the Taliban is extending its hold over large territories, while the rhetoric of liberation, development, and women's rights—so busily touted six years ago—has shrivelled to a hollow echo. Most people now acknowledge that the occupation of Iraq created a vast breeding ground for terrorist groups. Moreover, the intensifying sectarian violence is sucking U.S. troops into a multi-polar civil war that threatens to destabilize the region far beyond Iraq's borders (Hiltermann, p. 26). Finally, last year's July War on Lebanon seems to have produced only one obvious winner: Hizbullah's stature was enhanced not only by its ability to withstand Israel's attacks, but also by taking the lead in the reconstruction of key areas of Beirut (Fawaz, p. 22). In this context one might wonder whether this issue's title, "Conflict & Development," was inspired by hope or by cynicism.

In the prelude to war, Western governments spoke of "democratization," "women's rights," and "economic progress"—using discourses of development to legitimize violence. It is therefore unsurprising that "beneficiaries" are suspicious of the agendas behind foreign aid. "Democracy" and "liberation" gain new connotations when arriving in the form of oppression, violence, and insecurity.

The political entanglements of "development" require a fine balance be maintained. Ganji (p. 34) criticizes the oppression of women by the Iranian regime and reaffirms his own commitment to democracy. Interestingly, in his recent (18 September) open letter to the UN Secretary General he is equally critical of U.S. politics, including its funding of democracy assistance to Iran. His critique is directed both at the political motives behind the financial aid and the way in which the assistance allowed the Iranian government to denounce the activists as pawns of the U.S. While commitment to the ideals of "development" such as Ganji exhibits is laudable, naïve dreams which pay insufficient attention to social, political, and cultural realities can be disastrous. The promotion of technocratic solutions to inherently political problems in a volatile country such as Afghanistan has rendered many projects ineffective or counterproductive, as was the case of women's rights initiatives that inadvertently ended up weakening the position of women (Kandiyoti, p. 20).

The contributions in this issue do not offer definitive prescriptions, but by highlighting the complexities involved in "development" they suggest new ways of approaching the issue. Moreover, by documenting the work of Islamic charities they point out that Western or secular international NGOs are not the only, or even necessarily the most important, actors in development. Islamic charities are often more visible on the ground and better connected to the grassroots. This is not to say that they also produce "better" results: several authors note tensions between proselytizing and development activities (Weiss, p. 12; Utvik, p. 16) while others discuss whether Islamic charities empower their recipients or entangle them in new forms of patronage (Harmsen, p. 10; Sparre and Petersen, p. 14). But the relative success of these programmes challenges Western suspicions of religious development initiatives. In fact, in light of the West's less-than-stellar track record in recent development attempts, we may question its right to judge the propriety of development at all.

The front cover shows yet another type of ("post-"conflict) development. Rather than showcasing the work of an international NGO or Islamic charity, we chose to display a more mundane (and perhaps more common) form of development. The men in the picture have just returned to Afghanistan. What they are constructing is not clear yet. Perhaps it will not be beautiful, perhaps its shape will not conform to our expectations, but it is being built with the limited means available to people in a conflict-ridden society. It is their attempt to create a liveable future.

ISIM

The International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) conducts and promotes interdisciplinary research on social, political, cultural, and intellectual trends and movements in contemporary Muslim societies and communities. ISIM was established in 1998 by the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University, Utrecht University, and Radboud University Nijmegen in response to a need for further research on contemporary developments of great social, political, and cultural importance in the Muslim world from social science and humanities perspectives. ISIM's research approaches are expressly interdisciplinary and comparative, covering a large geographic range which includes North Africa, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, South and South East Asia, and Muslim communities in the West. Broad in scope, ISIM brings together all areas of disciplinary expertise in anthropology, sociology, religious studies, political science, and cultural studies.